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Population Bulletin

BY **LINDA A. JACOBSEN, MARK MATHER,** AND **GENEVIEVE DUPUIS**

HOUSEHOLD CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

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HOUSEHOLD CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

Once the norm in the United States, married-couple families with children no longer dominate the household landscape.

IN 2010

41 percent of all births were to unmarried parents, up from 33 percent in 2000.

66%

The share of all households that are families, down from 90 percent in 1940.

Increasingly complex and fluid living arrangements make it difficult to neatly classify households and individuals into mutually exclusive categories.

The number of households in the United States more than tripled between 1940 and 2010—from 35 million to 117 million—and household growth outpaced population growth in every decade across this time period.

Accompanying this growth in the number of households has been a gradual but significant transformation of household structure. While in 1940 the overwhelming majority of households (90 percent) contained families—two or more persons who were related to each other—by 2010, this share had dropped to 66 percent.

Household structure plays an important role in the economic and social well-being of families and individuals. The number and characteristics of household members affect the types of relationships and the pool of economic resources available within the household. Although families may provide social and economic support to members who reside in different households, an individual's overall well-being is heavily influenced by his or her living arrangements. Household structure may also have a broader impact by increasing the demand for economic and social support services. For example, the growth in single-parent families has increased the demand on the welfare system, while the rising number of older persons living alone may soon strain the supply of home health care and other personal assistance services.

A household comprises all the people who occupy a single housing unit, regardless of their relationship to one another. A household may be a family, for example, or it may be a group of roommates or two unmarried partners (see box, page 3). In this *Population Bulletin*, we examine the dramatic changes in U.S. household structure in the last 70 years, and how households differ by important characteristics such as age, race and ethnicity, and education. We analyze trends in the key social processes driving household change, including marriage, divorce, and marital and nonmarital childbearing. We also examine groups of people born in the same year or decade (birth cohorts) to see how the lifetime experiences of individuals have changed. New types of households and families are emerging in the United States in response to changing social norms, economic conditions, and laws governing marriage, and we discuss challenges in capturing these new family forms in demographic surveys.

Changing Household Structure

Prior to World War II, more than 75 percent of households in the United States included married-couple families (see Table 1, page 3). In 1940, married couples with children represented 43 percent of all households; married couples without children represented 33 percent of households; single-parent families accounted for only 4 percent of households; and other types of family households accounted for 9 percent. Nonfamily households made up only 10 percent of households nationwide, and most of those were persons living alone.

In 1960, as the post-war baby boom neared its end, married-couple families with children increased slightly to 44 percent of all households, while the share of married-couple families without children declined to 31 percent,

TABLE 1

Percent Distribution of U.S. Households by Type, 1940 to 2010

HOUSEHOLD TYPE	1940	1960	1980	2000	2010
Family Households	**90.0**	**85.1**	**73.7**	**68.1**	**66.4**
Married couples with children	42.9	44.3	30.7	23.5	20.2
Married couples without children	33.4	30.5	30.2	28.1	28.2
Single parents with children	4.3	4.1	7.2	9.2	9.6
Other family	9.4	6.2	5.6	7.1	8.5
Nonfamily Households	**10.0**	**15.1**	**26.4**	**31.9**	**33.6**
One person	7.8	13.4	22.6	25.8	26.7
Other nonfamily	2.2	1.7	3.8	6.1	6.8

Note: Percentages for subcategories may not sum to category totals due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, decennial censuses from 1940 to 2010.

and one-person households jumped from 8 percent to 13 percent.

By 1980—just 20 years later—a significant change in household structure had taken place. The share of family households had dropped to 74 percent, and the share of nonfamily households had risen to 26 percent. Married couples with children had declined to 31 percent—virtually the same share as married couples without children—and one-person households had increased by 10 percentage points to almost one-fourth of all households.

Since 1980, the pace of change has slowed but the transformation in household structure has continued, particularly the decrease in married couples with children and the increases in both cohabiting couples and one-person households. During the next 20 years, the decline in married-couple families with children will accelerate as more baby boomers reach retirement age, creating a new generation of empty nesters.

MARRIED COUPLES WITH CHILDREN

In 2010, married-couple families dropped below 50 percent of all households for the first time.[1] However, that decline is due primarily to the decrease in married-couple families with children rather than to a decrease in married couples without children. Today, only 20 percent of all households contain married couples with children, down from a high of 44 percent in 1960. In contrast, married-couple households without children declined slightly from 33 percent in 1940 to 28 percent of all households in 2010. The share of married-couple families without children exceeded the share with children every decade after 1980, and married-couple families with children are even outnumbered by one-person households today. Once the norm in the United States, married-couple families with children no longer dominate the household landscape.

The characteristics of married couples vary widely by age, race and ethnicity, and education. Reflecting ongoing delays in marriage among young adults, in only 20 percent of couples are the wives under age 35, while in 36 percent of couples the wives are 55 and older (see Table 2, page 4). Due to long-standing

Defining Household Types

A household is defined as all the people who occupy a single housing unit, regardless of their relationship to one another. One person in each household is designated as the "householder" and the relationship of all other household members is defined in relation to this person. The householder is usually the person, or one of the people ages 15 or older, in whose name the housing unit is owned, being bought, or rented.

A family household is one containing a householder and one or more additional people who are related to the householder by marriage, birth, or adoption. Any children under age 18 who are the biological, adopted, or stepchildren of the householder are classified as "own children." Family households include married couples with and without children under age 18, single-parent households with children, and other groupings of related adults such as two siblings sharing a housing unit or a married couple whose adult child has moved back home. A family household can also contain additional people who are not related to the householder. For example, a single-parent household with a child where a room is rented to an unrelated adult would be classified as a family household with nonrelatives present.

A nonfamily household consists of a householder who lives alone or who lives only with other people who are nonrelatives, such as roommates or an unmarried partner. Unmarried-partner households can be either family or nonfamily households depending on which partner is designated as the householder and whether there are any additional household members related to the householder. For example, if a mother and child move into her partner's house and her partner is designated as the householder, then it is considered a nonfamily household because neither the woman nor her child are related to the householder. However, if the partner moves into the home of the mother and her child and the mother is designated as the householder, then it is considered a family household with nonrelatives present. Of course, if an unmarried couple has a biological child together, their household would be classified as a family household—specifically a single-parent household—no matter which partner was designated as the householder, and even though such a child would actually be living with both biological parents.

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Married Couples and Opposite-Sex Unmarried Couples, and Presence of Children Under 18, 2011

	MARRIED COUPLES		UNMARRIED COUPLES	
	Percent of All Married Couples*	Percent of Married-Couple Group With at Least One Own Child <18	Percent of All Unmarried Couples*	Percent of Unmarried-Couple Group With at Least One Biological Child <18, of Either Partner
Total		**41**		**40**
Age of wife/female partner				
15 to 24	3	54	23	42
25 to 34	17	75	35	49
35 to 44	21	80	17	57
45 to 54	24	38	14	20
55 and older	36	3	11	3
Race/ethnicity of wife/ female partner				
White alone, non-Hispanic	74	38	66	32
Black alone, non-Hispanic	7	42	11	51
Latina	12	59	18	62
Other	7	46	5	38
Education of wife/female partner				
Less than high school	10	41	14	59
High school graduate	29	32	32	44
Some college	27	43	34	39
Bachelor's degree or more	34	48	21	23

*Percentages within categories may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

racial and ethnic differences in population size and the likelihood of marriage, it is not surprising that in the vast majority of married couples (74 percent), wives are non-Hispanic white; in 12 percent of couples, wives are Latinas; and in only 7 percent of couples, wives are African American or from other racial groups. Education levels among married couples are relatively high, and continue to increase. More than a third of wives have at least a bachelor's degree, while only 10 percent have not finished high school.

Overall, less than half (41 percent) of all married couples have children under age 18. The share of couples with children peaks at 80 percent among wives ages 35 to 44, but more than half of wives under age 25 also have at least one child. Young married women seem less likely to delay childbearing than never-married or cohabiting women, although these differences may result from a higher share of women with premarital pregnancies choosing to marry rather than remain single. The presence of children drops sharply after wives reach age 55, when most children have reached adulthood and couples have entered their empty-nest years. Fertility patterns among all women are mirrored in those of married couples, with Latinas being the most likely to have dependent children and non-Hispanic white wives the least likely. Among all married couples, wives who have attended or completed college are the most likely to have dependent children at home. This may seem counterintuitive since fertility rates are much higher among women with lower levels of education. However, since education levels among women have been increasing steadily since the 1960s, these differences in the presence of children simply reflect the higher levels of education among younger wives, who are also more likely to still have children in the household.

COHABITING COUPLES

One of the major trends driving the growth in nonfamily households with two or more people is the increase in cohabitation among unmarried adults. In 1970, less than 1 percent of all households included unmarried couples, yet by 2010, this share had increased to nearly 7 percent.[2] This

share may seem too low given that the majority of young adults today cohabit at some point, and that more than half of recent marriages were preceded by cohabitation.[3] This apparent anomaly is due to the fact that most cohabiting unions in the United States don't last long, either transitioning to marriage or ending within a few years. Therefore, the number of unmarried-partner households counted at one point in time, such as in the 2010 Census, is relatively small.

Households with unmarried couples are also increasingly likely to have dependent children. The 2010 Census counted nearly 7 million opposite-sex cohabiting couples in the United States, and 40 percent of these households included one or more "own" children under 18—nearly the same proportion as married-couple households. Although children in unmarried-partner households can benefit from the economic contributions of two caregivers, these unions tend to be less stable and have fewer economic resources than married-couple families.

The characteristics of unmarried couples vary considerably from those of married couples (see Table 2, page 4). For example, cohabiting couples are much younger—in almost 60 percent of these couples the female partner is under 35—thus increasing the likelihood of children also being part of the household. Cohabiting couples are also more likely than married couples to have female partners who are black or Latina, and less likely to have partners with college degrees.

Although the share of female cohabitors who have children is lower in every age group than the share for wives, the overall age pattern is similar, with a peak among 35-to-44-year-olds. The presence of children among racial and ethnic groups is also similar between unmarried and married couples, although black female cohabitors are more likely to have children than black wives (51 percent versus 42 percent, respectively). However, cohabiting women with bachelor's degrees are the least likely to have children (23 percent), while wives who have completed college are the most likely (48 percent).

Research shows that cohabitation is more common among people with lower levels of education and income.[4] There are still social and cultural expectations in the United States for couples to establish a sufficient, stable income before they marry. However, sustained declines in employment opportunities and real wages (due to globalization and the loss of blue-collar jobs) prevent many people without college degrees from meeting those expectations. Although they are less likely to marry than cohabitors who have attended or completed college, cohabitors with a high school diploma or less are still choosing to have children, even though many of them may end up raising those children as single parents if their cohabiting union ends.

The majority of unmarried couples are opposite-sex, with only about 1 percent of all couple households including same-sex couples.[5] The 2010 American Community Survey (ACS) estimated a total of 594,000 same-sex couple households in the United States, and one-fifth reported having at least one child under age 18.

LIVING ALONE

The rapid growth in one-person households between 1960 and 1980 was largely driven by increases in the share of older persons living alone. In the early 1900s, more than 70 percent of older persons lived with relatives; by 1980, only 23 percent did.[6] Improved health and financial status made it feasible for older persons without a spouse to live alone rather than with relatives or in a nursing home. Since the 1940s, increases in Social Security benefits have played a major role in the growth of independent living among the elderly. Between 1960 and 1980 alone, the share of women ages 65 and older who were living by themselves jumped from 23 percent to 41 percent. As the population ages 65 and older has increased since 1980, the number and share of one-person households has also continued to grow.

Householders under age 25 head only 4 percent of all one-person households in the United States, while people ages 65 and older make up 35 percent of single-person households. Of people living alone, 74 percent are non-Hispanic white, 15 percent are black, 3 percent are Asian American, and 7 percent are Latino. One-person households are almost equally distributed across education categories with the exception of those with less than a high school diploma. Only 13 percent of those who live alone have not completed high school, compared with nearly 30 percent each who have completed high school, some college, or a bachelor's degree or more.

AGE DIFFERENCES IN HOUSEHOLD STRUCTURE

Individuals live in a number of different household types over their lives (see Table 3). About 22 percent of householders under age 25 live alone, and an additional 24 percent live with unrelated roommates. Young adults are equally likely to head single-parent or "other family" households (18 percent each). Delays in marriage are seen in the small share of young adults

TABLE 3

Percent Distribution of U.S. Household Types by Age of Householder, 2012

	AGE OF HOUSEHOLDER				
Household Types	**Total**	**<25**	**25-44**	**45-64**	**65+**
Married couples with children	20	10	38	15	1
Married couples without children	29	7	12	39	44
Single parents with children	9	18	19	5	0.4
Other families	8	18	5	10	9
Persons living alone	27	22	18	27	44
Other nonfamilies	6	24	8	4	2

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

TABLE 4

Percent Distribution of U.S. Household Types by Race/Ethnicity of Householder, 2012

	RACE/ETHNICITY OF HOUSEHOLDER					
Household Types	Total	White*	Black*	Asian*	Other Race**	Latino
Married couples with children	20	19	12	31	20	29
Married couples without children	29	33	16	30	20	19
Single parents with children	9	6	19	5	15	17
Other families	8	7	15	10	11	12
Persons living alone	27	29	34	17	27	17
Other nonfamilies	6	6	4	5	8	6

*Non-Hispanic.
**Includes all other single race groups and all race combinations.
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

heading married-couple families with or without children. In this stage of life, young adults are finishing school, moving out on their own, and getting established in the workforce. With lower income levels, many young adults reduce expenses by living with other relatives or unrelated roommates. Cohabitation is also common at this stage, but is not easy to identify in Table 3 (page 5) because unmarried couples are included in either nonfamily households or in single-parent households if they have children.

As young adults move into the prime marriage and family formation stages between ages 25 and 44, household composition shifts dramatically, reflecting a big jump in the share of married-couple families with children and a sharp decline in other nonfamily households. Almost one-fifth of householders in this age group still head single-parent families and nearly one-fifth live alone, but these household types now include both those who have never married and those who are separated, divorced, or widowed.

People between ages 45 and 64 experience another dramatic shift in household composition. Over half of householders in this age group still head married-couple families, but now couples without children predominate. This is the stage when most children move out, and with fewer children, many couples move into this stage sooner than they did in previous years. However, the cultural shift to later marriage and childbearing is reflected in the 15 percent of married-couple households in this age group that still have children at home. Cohabitation is less common among people ages 45 to 64, reflected in the smaller shares of other nonfamily and single-parent households.

The overwhelming majority (88 percent) of householders ages 65 and older either head married-couple families without children or live alone. Those living alone include the never-married as well as those who have been widowed or divorced. As their health status declines, many people ages 65 and older will transition into group quarters such as nursing homes.

RACIAL/ETHNIC DIFFERENCES

In 2012, about 9 percent of households nationwide are headed by single parents with children (see Table 4). However, among African American households, that figure increases to 19 percent and among Latino households it increases to 17 percent. Single-parent families—most of which are headed by women—face significant challenges balancing work and family responsibilities and have higher poverty rates compared with married-couple families.[7] In 2011, more than half of all children in female-headed families (54 percent) lived with mothers who had been previously married, but the share of single parents who have never been married has been rising.[8]

In 2012, 31 percent of Asian American households and 29 percent of Latino households are headed by married couples with children, compared with 20 percent of households nationwide. The higher rates for Latinos and Asian Americans reflect the younger age structures of those groups. Among Latinos, early marriage and childbearing—often occurring before age 25—is another factor that has contributed to a high proportion of families with children.

The share of people living alone has also increased nationwide but is most common among African American (34 percent) and white householders (29 percent). The increase in persons living alone has been driven by changes at both ends of the age spectrum: At younger ages, more young adults are moving out on their own and delaying marriage, and at older ages, people are living longer and more independently than they have in the past. Living alone is less common among Latinos and Asian Americans, not only because of their younger age structures, but also because many Asian and Latino households—especially those with first-generation families—include extended family members.

DIFFERENCES BY EDUCATION LEVEL

People with four-year college degrees have higher incomes than those who have never gone to college. But the effects of education go beyond economics, influencing marriage decisions and household structure. In 2012, single-parent households with children were most common among the less educated, while married-couple households—with or without children—were more common among householders with at least a bachelor's degree (see Table 5, page 7). Those with less education are increasingly choosing cohabitation over marriage, and those who do marry are less likely to stay married compared with these who finish college.[9]

TABLE 5

Percent Distribution of U.S. Household Types by Education of Householder, 2012

Household Types	EDUCATION OF HOUSEHOLDER				
	Total	Less Than High School	High School Graduate	Some College	Bachelor's Degree or More
Married couples with children	20	16	16	19	25
Married couples without children	29	23	31	27	32
Single parents with children	9	13	10	11	5
Other families	8	13	10	9	5
Persons living alone	27	31	29	27	26
Other nonfamilies	6	4	5	7	7

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

The proportion of householders living alone is relatively similar across different educational groups. But those with college degrees are more likely to live alone in their 20s and then transition to stable marriages after finishing school, while those with less education are more likely to get married at younger ages, become separated or divorced, and spend more time in their 30s and 40s living alone.[10]

What's Driving Changes in Household Structure?

Changes in marriage and fertility behaviors have been the driving forces behind long-term changes in household structure in the United States. We examine trends in marriage, divorce, and childbearing for birth cohorts of women to understand these changes.

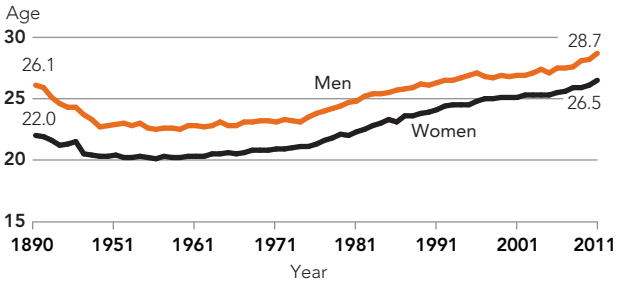
RISING AGE AT MARRIAGE

Marriage used to be a near-universal phenomenon in the United States. Estimates from the mid-1960s show marriage rates of 80 percent or more among young adults ages 25 to 34. However, young adults are increasingly delaying marriage and childbearing to later ages, signaling a major shift in patterns of family formation compared with earlier generations.[11] The long-term decline in marriage accelerated during the past decade; by 2012, only 46 percent of young adults ages 25 to 34 were married, down from 55 percent in 2000.[12]

In 1890, median age at marriage was around 26 for men and 22 for women (see Figure 1). Age at marriage declined during the rapid industrialization that occurred around the turn of the 20th century. Wages increased and more young men were able to start families at a young age.[13] By 1956, during the peak of the baby boom, median age at marriage had dropped to 22.5 among men and 20.1 for women. But the relatively young age at marriage during the baby boom is increasingly viewed as an historical anomaly.[14] Since the mid-1960s, age at marriage has steadily increased among both men and women. By 2011, the median age at first marriage had peaked at 28.7 for men and 26.5 for women. If current trends continue, there will be a growing share of women and men who postpone marriage until their 30s, reducing the share of their adult lifetimes they will spend married.

FIGURE 1

Median Age at First Marriage by Gender, 1890 to 2011



Source: U.S. Census Bureau.

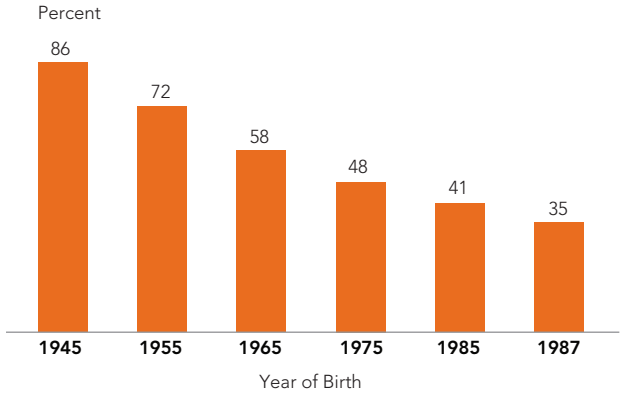
A GENERATIONAL SHIFT IN U.S. MARRIAGE TRENDS

The rising age at marriage has been accompanied by a growing share of young adults who have never been married. In a 2010 survey, 39 percent of Americans reported that they felt marriage was becoming obsolete, compared with 28 percent in 1978.[15] Previous research has projected that 90 percent of adults will eventually get married, but this may be overly optimistic given the declining share of young adults who are tying the knot.[16] Among women born in 1945—who grew up during the U.S. baby boom—about 86 percent had married by age 25 (see Figure 2, page 8). Among women born 40 years later, in 1985, only 41 percent had been married by age 25. The proportion dropped to 35 percent among women born just two years later in 1987.

Time will tell if these 25-year-olds will ever achieve marriage rates as high as those of their parents' and grandparents' generations. Historically, most women have gotten married by age 40, so that is a fairly good marker of the share of women who will ever marry. Among women born in 1945, about 93 percent were married by age 40, compared with 84 percent of women born in 1970. Today's 25-year-olds are on track to have an even lower proportion ever married by age 40, suggesting that more women may not marry at all.[17] But results from the National Survey of

FIGURE 2

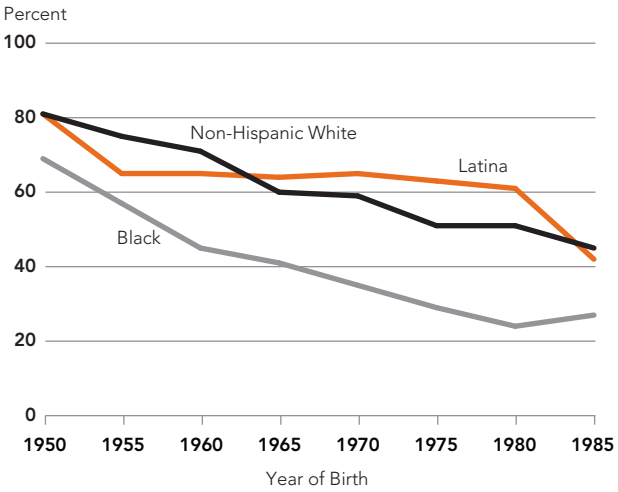
Percent of Women Who Have Ever Been Married by Age 25, by Birth Cohort



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

FIGURE 3

Percent of Women Who Have Ever Been Married by Age 25, by Race/Ethnicity and Birth Cohort



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

Family Growth suggest that the timing of marriage is changing, but not the overall likelihood of getting married.[18]

The historical decline in marriage has been linked to rising divorce rates, an increase in women's educational attainment and labor force participation, and a rise in cohabitation as an alternative or precursor to marriage.[19]

A complex relationship between marriage and education is emerging in the United States. Historically, education has been associated with later age at marriage, and data from the National Survey of Family Growth show that this relationship still exists. In 2006-2010, about 37 percent of women with bachelor's degrees had ever been married by age 25, compared with 53 percent of women with only a high school diploma. But those with bachelor's degrees are more likely to be in stable (first-marriage) unions compared with less-educated individuals. Among women ages 22 to 44 with bachelor's degrees, 58 percent were in a first-marriage union in 2006-2010, compared with 40 percent of women with only a high school diploma. Women with high school diplomas were more than twice as likely to be cohabiting (16 percent) compared with college graduates (7 percent).[20] Women with less education were also more likely to be divorced or in a second marriage. In recent years, this "marriage gap" between different educational groups has grown, as marriage rates have declined fastest among those without college degrees.[21] The recession may have exacerbated this gap because of its disproportionate impact on men with fewer job skills and less education.

Marriage rates have dropped the fastest among African Americans. With each successive birth cohort (except 1985), there has been a decrease in the percentage of black women who have been married by age 25 (see Figure 3). In general, black women of all ages are now much less likely than women in other racial/ethnic groups to have been married. However, Latinas, who have historically had higher rates of marriage, experienced a sharp drop in marriage among recent cohorts. This decline may be linked to the growing share of Latinos who are born in the United States and who are adopting U.S. patterns of marriage and family formation. For the period from 2006 to 2010, 25 percent of foreign-born Latinas had entered a first marriage by age 20, while only 15 percent of U.S.-born Latinas were married by age 20—about the same share as non-Hispanic whites.[22]

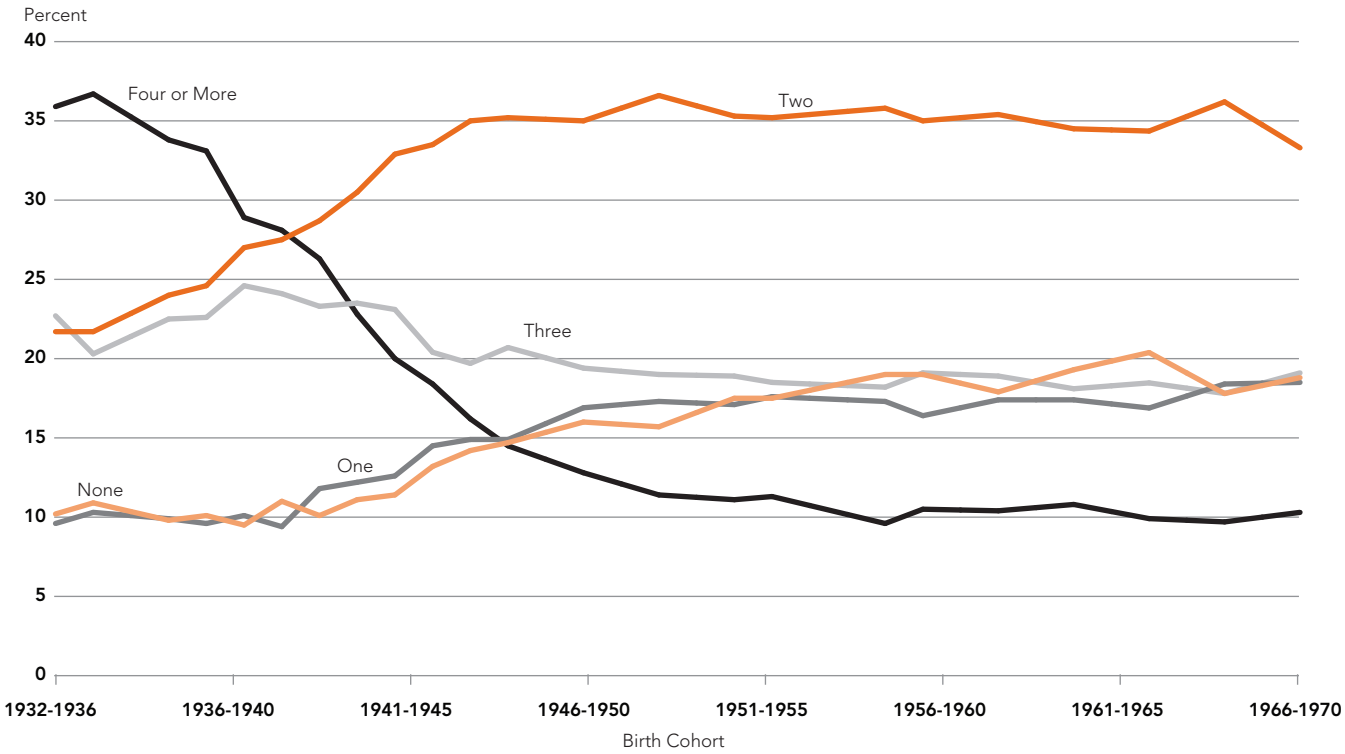
DIVORCE RATES DECLINE

Divorce is another key factor shaping long-term changes in household structure in the United States. Rising divorce rates during the 1960s and 1970s contributed to an increase in single-parent families and a decline in married couples, but divorce rates have fallen since 1980. The current divorce rate (3.6 divorces per 1,000 population) is substantially lower than it was at its peak in the late 1970s (5.5).[23] Looking across generations, women born in the 1950s were more likely to experience divorce compared with later cohorts. About 25 percent of women born in the 1950s had ever been divorced by age 35, compared with 22 percent of women born in the late 1960s. Divorce statistics can be misleading because the divorce rate is dependent on the share of people who are getting married. However, researchers have found a similar decline in divorce among ever-married women.[24]

Despite the recent decline in divorce rates, about 48 percent of women's first marriages are projected to be disrupted within 20 years due to divorce, separation, or death. For those without any education beyond high school, the probability of a marital disruption is even higher (59 percent).[25]

FIGURE 4

Percent of Women Ages 40 to 44 by Number of Children Ever Born, by Birth Cohort



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, June Supplement.

FEWER CHILDREN

Women are having fewer children and rates of childlessness have increased. The recent decline in U.S. fertility, to about 1.9 births per woman, has been linked to job losses associated with the recent recession.[26] But longer-term fertility trends predate the economic downturn. We analyzed birth cohorts from 1932 to 1970 to compare the number of children ever born to women ages 40 to 44 (often used as a measure of completed fertility). Successive cohorts of women born in the 1930s and 1940s experienced sharp declines in the share having four or more children, while having two children emerged as the dominant pattern (see Figure 4). The proportions of women having no children, one child, or three children have converged, at around 19 percent each.

These trends point to changing preferences for smaller families, including a growing number of women who are childless. Between 1980 and 2010, the share of women ages 40 to 44 who were childless increased from 10 percent to 19 percent.

Researchers have cited several factors in the rise in childlessness, including the rising age at marriage; the increase in women attending college; and infertility, particularly among older women who have delayed childbearing.

MORE BIRTHS OUTSIDE OF MARRIAGE

In 2010, 41 percent of all births were to unmarried parents, up from 33 percent in 2000.[27] The steepest increases in nonmarital births are evident among women in their 20s, but women in their 30s are also more likely to have births outside of marriage compared with previous decades. In 2010, about 63 percent of births to women ages 20 to 24 occurred outside of marriage.

In recent years, a disproportionate share of nonmarital births have been to couples with lower levels of education and to racial/ethnic minorities. Among African Americans, 72 percent of births occur outside of marriage, compared with 65 percent of births to American Indians, 56 percent to Latinas, 36 percent to whites, and 17 percent to Asian Americans. It's estimated that half of all births outside of marriage are to cohabiting couples.

Challenges in Measuring Change

Increasingly complex and fluid living arrangements make it difficult to neatly classify households and individuals into mutually exclusive categories. For example, is it accurate and meaningful for children who live part-time with each of their parents under a joint custody agreement to be classified as living in a single-parent family? And, which of these parent's characteristics should be used to measure the children's social and economic

status? If a woman's boyfriend pays rent for an apartment he shares with two roommates, but spends most nights at her apartment, how should their living arrangements be classified?

There are often lags between rapid social change and the availability of data to measure and understand the change. Demographers trying to measure and understand the fundamental changes in household structure that have taken place in the United States over the last 50 years are limited by the ways data are collected and tabulated. Overcoming these limitations may require changing survey questions and methods as well as reconceptualizing the taxonomy of household types.

CHANGING SURVEY QUESTIONS

Three major demographic surveys provide data on changing household structure in the United States. The decennial census collects data once a decade from all households, while the Current Population Survey (CPS) collects data annually from a sample of about 55,000 households. Since 2005, the American Community Survey (ACS) has been collecting data continuously across each year from a sample of about 3 million households per year.

Although cohabitation emerged in the 1970s and increased rapidly during the 1980s, the census and the CPS did not change their questions about household relationship until the 1990s. The 1990 Census was the first decennial census to offer the category "unmarried partner" as one of the options for relationship to householder, and this option was not added to the CPS until 1995. Before this category was included to provide a direct measure of cohabitation, researchers had to estimate cohabitation indirectly from information on household composition. Households were classified as cohabitors if they contained only two adults over age 15 who were unrelated and of the opposite sex. These households were called POSSLQ—**p**ersons of **o**pposite **s**ex **s**haring **l**iving **q**uarters. Although some of these households were undoubtedly cohabiting couples, others were just roommates with no intimate relationship. This indirect measure underestimated cohabiting-couple households, especially those with children.[28]

More recently, laws in some states have changed to permit same-sex couples to marry or establish civil unions and domestic partnerships that provide some legal benefits and rights similar to marriage. These legal changes have made it confusing for same-sex couples to accurately and consistently report their marital and relationship status. In the 2008 ACS, 150,000 same-sex couples reported themselves as married, but administrative records indicated there were only 35,000 legally married same-sex couples in the United States.[29]

In response to these changes, Census Bureau researchers are developing and testing alternate wording for relationship and marital status questions for federal surveys such as the census, CPS, and ACS.[30] Other efforts to improve measurement of new household types include adding questions to the ACS to identify grandparents serving as primary caregivers for their grandchildren, and questions on the CPS to identify children in unmarried-couple households who are living with two parents.

CHANGING HOUSEHOLD CATEGORIES

The same traditional categories shown in Table 1 have been used to tabulate and present data on household structure for many decades. However, these categories do not adequately reflect the changes in living arrangements described in this *Bulletin*. For example, it is not possible to identify cohabiting-couple households because they may be classified as either "other nonfamily households" or "single-parent households" if they have children. Moreover, children born to an unmarried couple are classified as living in a single-parent family even when they are living with both biological parents. Growth in the number of same-sex couples and the fact that in some states they can be legally married raises the question of whether they should be included in the category "married couples" or presented as a special sub-group of either married-couple or unmarried-couple households. As survey questions change to better measure new types of households and living arrangements, the household taxonomy used to tabulate and present data needs to change as well.

Conclusion

The significant changes in how people form "families" and "households" affect their well-being. Marriage is associated with many benefits for families and individuals, including higher income, better health, and longer life expectancy. One reason for these benefits may be that people with higher potential earnings and better health are "selected" into marriage, resulting in better outcomes for married couples. However, most researchers agree that marriage also has an independent, positive effect on well-being.[31] Thus, the recent decline in marriage may contribute to worse outcomes for less-educated individuals, beyond those resulting from the recent recession. Differences in marriage rates among racial/ethnic groups also contribute to income disparities across racial/ethnic groups and the transmission of poverty across generations.[32]

Declining marriage rates put more children at risk of growing up poor, which can have lasting consequences for their health and future economic prospects.[33] In 2010, nonmarital births accounted for 41 percent of all births in the United States. Although roughly half of these nonmarital births are to cohabiting couples, these unions tend to have fewer economic resources compared with married couples.[34] In addition, among women with lower levels of education, cohabiting and having children with multiple partners creates complex sibling and parent relationships and family instability.[35] And, economic support and participation in childrearing varies significantly among fathers once they move out. More children are growing up in these environments, and research points to negative outcomes for these children, including behavior problems and difficulties interacting with peers at school.[36]

Finally, declines in marriage and increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing have implications for the well-being of older persons. Many people ages 65 and older in the United States rely on family caregivers for support and assistance as they age and their health declines. However, lower rates of marriage and higher rates of divorce mean that more people will reach age 65 without a spouse to rely on for care. Many older persons who live alone turn to adult children for support and assistance. But declines in fertility and increases in divorce and nonmarital childbearing may also reduce the number of children who are available and willing to care for an aging parent, especially if the parent wasn't around when his or her children were growing up. A shortage of family caregivers for the elderly could increase the demand for community-based home health care and personal assistance services.

Although the changing patterns of marriage and childbearing in the United States are not in and of themselves negative or positive, they have led to more complex and fluid living arrangements that are affecting the well-being of individuals and families. Taken together, the demographic, economic, and educational trends discussed in this *Bulletin* point to increasing burdens on children and families as well as potential impacts on the U.S. economy and government services.

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HOUSEHOLD CHANGE IN THE UNITED STATES

The number of households in the United States more than tripled between 1940 and 2010—from 35 million to 117 million—and household growth outpaced population growth in every decade across this time period. Accompanying this growth in the number of households has been a gradual but significant transformation of household structure. While in 1940 the overwhelming majority of households (90 percent) contained families—two or more persons who were related to each other—by 2010, this share had dropped to 66 percent. Household structure plays an important role in the economic and social well-being of families and individuals. The number and characteristics of household members affect the types of relationships and the pool of economic resources available within the household.

In this *Population Bulletin*, we examine the dramatic changes in U.S. household structure in the last 70 years, and how households differ by important characteristics such as age, race and ethnicity, and education. We analyze trends in the key social processes driving household change, and examine groups of people born in the same year or decade (birth cohorts) to see how the lifetime experiences of individuals have changed. New types of households and families are emerging in the United States in response to changing social norms, economic conditions, and laws governing marriage, and we discuss challenges in capturing these new family forms in demographic surveys.

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